

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Public Information Department, 11150 East Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340

PRESS RELEASE

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BENT WOOD AND METAL FURNITURE: 1850-1946

August 24 - October 16, 1988

The first exhibition in the United States to concentrate on furniture made from bent wood or bent metal will conclude its national tour at The Cleveland Museum of Art, where it will be on view from August 24 through October 16, 1988. *Bent Wood and Metal Furniture: 1850-1946* presents 119 works, including chairs, tables, desks, chaise lounges, a folding screen, a music rack, and a clock. Progressive architects and designers who revolutionized the design and manufacture of furniture during a hundred-year period include John Henry Belter, Michael Thonet, Josef Hoffmann, Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Alvar Aalto, and Charles and Ray Eames.

This landmark exhibition, organized by the American Federation of Arts, traces bent wood furniture from a few early handcrafted examples, like the humble Windsor chair made by individual craftsmen in limited quantity, to molded plywood chairs machine-made for mass distribution. The pioneer German designer Michael Thonet first applied the bending process to mass production. In 1830 he began experimenting with furniture made of wood steamed into a state soft and pliable enough to allow it to be bent into the shapes of his designs. Thonet and his flourishing firm brilliantly exploited the new technology and a streamlined manufacturing process. Numerous examples of Thonet's diverse designs are presented, including a beechwood settee with

2- the cleveland museum of art/bent wood and metal furniture elaborately curving back (ca. 1850) and fine examples of the most famous of all his creations, the Side Chair Number 14, also of beechwood (ca. 1855). Thonet's furniture--lightweight, easy to ship, and relatively inexpensive--dramatically influenced taste and changed the design and production of modern furniture throughout Europe.

After Thonet's patent ran out, in 1869, others could build on his achievements. Viennese avant-garde architects designed bent wood furniture to complement their various architectural ideas, such as Adolf Loos's Café Museum Side Chair (ca. 1898), Josef Hoffmann's Purkersdorf Sanitorium Side Chair (ca. 1904), and Otto Wagner's designs for the Imperial Postal Savings Bank in Vienna (1905-06). All of these pieces were suitable for mass production, and each acquired a popular following beyond the setting for which it was designed.

Bauhaus visionaries such as Marcel Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier gave fresh impetus after the First World War to the renewed search for a cohesively designed environment. The repertory of materials used for furnishings with bent elements was expanded to include metal. Embracing the mechanistic aesthetic with its clean pure lines and industrial finish, the new modern furniture was integral to avant-garde architectural ideas of the 1920s. One of the most daring inventions of the period was the cantilevered chair, such as Mies's Side Chair (1927) of bent nickeled tubular steel. Breuer's Wassily chair (1925), reputedly based on the form, materials, and resiliency of a bicycle, Mies's "Barcelona" Chair of bent chromed flat steel with leather (1929), and R. C. Coquery's Lounge Chair (ca. 1929) of bent chromed tubular steel represent some of the more sumptuous creations of this period. From the lounges of one of the Zeppelin dirigibles comes a less familiar piece, the

3- the cleveland museum of art/bent wood and metal furniture
lightweight (and very costly) aluminum armchair designed by Fritz August
Breuhaus (ca. 1935).

In the early 1930s and the 1940s, plywood was the material many avant-garde designers favored. Such a Scandinavian master as Alvar Aalto employed technological improvements in the lamination process to create continuous forms which introduced a new degree of comfort and grace to modern furniture design. Less well known is the British-born designer Gerald Summers, whose bent plywood tea trolley (ca. 1935) is one of the most appealing pieces in the show. American designers Charles and Ray Eames used plywood veneers in daring new ways, creating shaped plywood shells to form seats and backs that had sculptural flair and were virtually weightless. Their molded ash plywood Side Chair (1946) has been as ubiquitous in the late 20th century as was Thonet's Side Chair #14 in the late 19th century.

Alexander von Vegesack, a decorative arts collector, conceived the exhibition and acted as its European coordinator for the American Federation of Arts, while Derek Ostergard, adjunct professor in the Cooper-Hewitt/Parsons graduate program in the decorative arts, expanded the original proposal and served as guest curator. Lenders to the exhibition include Mr. von Vegesack, Mr. and Mrs. Al Luckett, Jr.; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Museum of Applied Arts, Helsinki; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Baltimore Museum of Art; and Chateau Dufresne, Musée des arts décoratifs de Montreal; and other private and public collections in Europe, the United States, and Canada. A major catalogue accompanies the exhibition, with essays by European and American scholars. Published by the American Federation of Arts in association with the University of Washington Press, the catalogue is available at the Museum Bookstore (\$30 paperbound). Additional support for

4- the cleveland museum of art/bent wood and metal furniture

the catalogue came from The J. M. Kaplan Fund and the DeWitt Wallace Fund through the AFA's Revolving Fund for Publications.

Henry Hawley, chief curator of Later Western Art at The Cleveland Museum of Art, supervised the exhibition and its accompanying programs in Cleveland.

Bent Wood and Metal Furniture: 1850-1946 is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Mabel Pew Myrin Trust, the National Patrons of the AFA, Lufthansa German Airlines, and the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, Stuttgart. The Cleveland showing is assisted by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

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For additional information, color slides, or photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.